

Needfinding and Empathy Work

Who We Talked To

We conducted needfinding interviews with 9 individuals:

- 4 homeschooling parents
 - P1 is a stay-at-home mom who homeschooled four sons and continues to homeschool her youngest child. She has a background in teaching in the classroom and an education degree.
 - P2 is a stay-at-home mom who is homeschooling one child while also caring for a baby (whom she plans to homeschool when the time comes). She had a background in teaching in the classroom and an education degree.
 - P3 is a Licensed Marriage and Family Counselor and homeschooled three of her four children over six years.
 - P4 is a mother to four and is currently homeschooling her two eldest daughters. She was a nurse before becoming a stay-at-home mother.
- 4 homeschooled individuals
 - S1 is a current college freshman who was homeschooled by his mother for 1st, 2nd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th grade.
 - S2 is a current Master's student who was homeschooled from pre-K to 9th grade along with his two younger sisters.
 - S3 is a current Master's student who was homeschooled from 2nd to 9th grade for the purpose of pursuing competitive tennis.
 - S4 is a current college freshman who was homeschooled by his mother from pre-K all the way through high school, along with his three brothers.
- 1 academic expert
 - E1 is an educator in the Stanford Graduate School of Education. They have conducted research on teachers' technology adoption, and she has interests in parenting in today's digital world.

What We Learned

After our interviews, we completed empathy boards for each participant: [Miro Board](#)

We synthesized our findings into 4 main themes that we saw running through our empathy maps. Below we have included some of the main observations, quotes, and stories that lie under each of these themes.

1. Motivation to homeschool

There are many different reasons that families decide to homeschool their children, ranging from religious reasons to a desire for their child to play a sport at a highly competitive level. These various reasons underlying a family's motivation to homeschool leads to vastly different experiences and outcomes for their children. Overall, it is important to recognize that each homeschooling parent and child have a unique experience that is affected by a complex array of factors.

- "Peer influence might have a greater influence than parents on children."
– P3
- "Ideally teachers would be able to differentiate instruction for students in a classroom but very hard and requires a lot of intention, but in homeschooling you really get to go your own pace and go fast if you get it or bring in fun things." – P2
- "I feel like our public school system is mainly in place to serve parents. It's convenient to drop your kid off because that serves the parents' lifestyle. But I don't think that's a natural way to function as a child. It's an artificial setting." – P4

2. Methods of Teaching

Across the interviews that we conducted, we found that the methods of teaching differ and range widely. The overarching idea that we found was that the interaction between the student and the parent/teacher is extremely important. Good feedback and good relationships can create a positive learning environment whereas a bad environment can prevent any learning from happening. Furthermore, there are many different methods of teaching including developing curriculum and materials, online schooling, exploration and field trips, outsourcing to specialists, or even focusing on the parents strengths and teaching to those.

- "Life is a learning laboratory." – P1

- “You only learn by doing.” – S4
- “The right amount of boredom is the breeding ground for creativity, but too much boredom is the breeding ground for trouble.” – P1
- “The really great thing about homeschooling was when and if I did find some outsourcing that was remarkable.” – P3

3. Peers and Community

Community and socialization is so important for children. There are a variety of ways that children can make friends while being homeschooled such as participating in a homeschooling co-op, participating in Scouts, attending youth group, playing a sport, learning an instrument, and more. Homeschooling parents are largely responsible for catalyzing and supporting their children’s community, and it is essential that kids have the opportunity to spend time with others their same age as this greatly affects their eventual transition into public school, college, or the workforce.

- “I do firmly believe that your kid has to be in a more social situation by high school. Easier to enter a high school and say, ‘I was homeschooled’, than enter college and say, ‘I was homeschooled’.” – S3
- “Giving them the chance to cultivate relationships with their siblings instead of sending them off is a really big gift.” – P4
- “I didn’t have that much trouble finding new friends or adapting. I had enough social experience. My mom did involve us with other communities pretty often. It wasn’t the first time I was involved in group dynamics.” – S1

4. Agency vs. Authority

Homeschooling looks different for each family. One key element is the role of parental authority and educational decision-making alongside student agency. Parents must decide how much autonomy to give their children in the learning process. In earlier years of homeschooling education, the parents with whom we spoke decided on curriculum without taking much input from their children. However, as their children developed, some parents gave their children more input and tried to tailor their education and extracurriculars more toward each child’s interests. Regardless of the teaching methodology, a recurring theme in the interviews was the importance of having a good attitude toward learning. Parents wanted to instill the importance of lifelong learning in their children,

showing them that education need not just take place in formal settings. Some students, though, noted that a parent taking on the role of a child's main educator can have downsides. Some had seen, experienced, or saw the potential for unhealthy power dynamics that have negative impacts on education and relationships.

- “When it’s just me, I think she feels like, ‘Oh mom’s just telling me what to do’ She loves the content-based subjects but with the skill-based subjects, it’s just a little harder to get the buy-in with her.” – P4
- “Parents say: you’re my kid. I know what’s best for you. But they forget that the kid needs to have some agency in the process as well.” – S3
- “The love of learning will be tanked if the child does not have a bedrock of respect for authority in their life.” – P3

